

South Views

No.21, 19 July 2012

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Food Issues in the Rio+20 Spotlight

Among the issues that caught the public imagination at the recent Rio+20 summit was the right of all people to good, nutritious food, and the need to support small farmers and promote ecologically sound agricultural methods. Martin Khor reports on the Sustainable Development Dialogue on Food Security.

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By Martin Khor

Food security and sustainable agriculture was one of the most important topics at the recent Rio+20 Summit, for the simple reason that all of us have to eat to survive, and agriculture has to be ecologically sustainable for production to continue into the future.

While the negotiators were busily hammering out a quite satisfactory text on this topic in a small room, a more interesting discussion was taking place on Food and Nutrition Security in the huge plenary hall sitting 2,000 people.

I was one of the ten panellists in this debate, part of the seven Sustainable Development Dialogues that were organised by the Brazilian government as part of the official summit programme. Other topics in the dialogue series included the global financial crisis, unemployment, energy, oceans, cities, forests and production and consumption patterns.

In the food dialogue, other panellists included former prime minister of Mozambique Luisa Dias Diogo, former UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, Indian ecologist Vandana Shiva, founder of the Slow Food Movement Carlo Petrini, Vice President of the World Economic Forum Josette Sheeran, Brazilian academic Renato Maluf and several representatives of farmers' organisations.

Before the dialogue, there was a months-long internet-based interactive discussion open to all and the thousands that took part proposed solutions to the food problem. The panel was to discuss which proposals were most important, and forward them to the heads of states meeting a few days later.

There was significant agreement among the panellists that small farmers in developing countries, and especially women, were the key to both the present and the future of agriculture. Empowering small farmers through access to land, credit, subsidies, storage facilities and transport, were thus essential. The expansion of national budgets and aid allocation to small-scale agriculture is thus a priority, as is the strengthening of farmers' organisations that can fight for their interests.

Many panellists stressed the need for ecological farming methods. The huge stress on chemical-based water-intensive agriculture had been a mistake because of its impact on the environment, including its being a main cause of climate change, and the dependence of small farmers to purchase fertilisers, pesticides and seeds.

The resulting household debt had led to over 200,000 farmer suicides in India, we were reminded by Vandana Shiva. Nor is genetic engineering a solution, due to food safety and environmental problems as well as taking seeds out of the control of farmers.

Thus, the agro-ecology approach should be given the chance it never had until now, through big support for research, extension and major support by international agencies, to show that sustainable agriculture is not only good for the environment but is productive enough to feed the world.

A rights-based approach was advocated by many, especially Mary Robinson who stressed that food and nutrition security are human rights. Thus, governments should ensure that citizens have access to food.

The Brazilian “zero hunger” policy initiated by former President Lula de Silva, in which the state transferred funds to poor families, was held up as a model, as was the new food security bill in India.

Several panellists identified the way food has become part of the global financial system as a new crisis-laden problem. Petrini said food used to be sacred and the main thing in life, but it had become a mere product in the commodity and financial market, causing large swings in prices.

The slow food movement founder said that more energy is now used to produce food than the energy contained in the food. A new paradigm is needed to address the big food crisis, including reducing food waste, stopping land grabs in Africa, combatting rich country subsidies that undercut poor farmers’ markets, fighting food speculation as well as the profit-centred push for genetically modified organisms that damages small communities.

My own focus was on how the global trading system was still allowing massive distortions in which rich countries subsidised agriculture by almost US\$400 billion a year and sold subsidised foods to poor countries at artificially low prices, thus damaging the livelihoods of small farmers.

The IMF and World Bank imposed a policy package on African countries that got them to remove subsidies and support for farmers while cutting their tariffs to 10-20 per cent, thus opening the road to surges of food imports and converting poor countries from being net exporters to net importers of food.

This trend may even worsen if North-South free trade agreements (for example between Europe and Africa) result in zero agricultural tariffs in developing countries while not addressing agricultural subsidies of developed countries.

Meanwhile, speculation has increased tremendously in commodity markets, and greatly magnifies the volatility in food prices, which has added to the food access problem.

International policies are thus needed to get rich countries to cut their agricultural subsidies; assist developing countries with programmes supporting their small farmers through land access, credit and marketing, subsidies and appropriate tariffs; curb commodity speculation; change the terms of free trade agreements; and promote ecological farming.

At the end of the three-hour session, the 2,000 participants voted for the most important proposals, as did the panellists. The three chosen proposals were:

Promote food systems that are sustainable and contribute to improvement of health.

Eliminate misery and poverty-rooted malnutrition.

Develop policies to encourage sustainable production of food supplies directed to both producers and consumers.

Meanwhile, at the negotiating halls, the government officials were finalizing their own text to be adopted by the heads of states and governments.

The text, adopted on 22 June, has a good, long section on “food security and nutrition and sustainable agriculture.” It reaffirms the right to food, emphasizes rural development and the importance of small farmers and indigenous peoples and their need for secure land tenure and credit, and promotes sustainable agriculture, while stressing the need to address the root causes of food price volatility.

However it has only a very weak paragraph on trade. It does not address problems caused by developed countries' agricultural subsidies or the need for small farmers in developing countries to adopt a trade policy that allows them to survive and to thrive.

Hopefully, the relative prominence in Rio+20 given to food security, the right to food, sustainable agriculture, and the interests of small farmers, will give a boost to the movements and policies that promote these goals.

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This article was published in the South Bulletin (6 July 2012).

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